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ABSTRACT

Based on a journalist's experience with students, observation of and conversations with hundreds of teachers and principals, and 22 years' experience as an employer in business communications, this keynote speech reports on the current crisis teachers face in developing the communication skills of their students for the future. The speech outlines the social problems faced by today's young people and advances some ideas about how teachers and principals can help foster critical thinking skills in students. The speech also advances the idea of a new program called "Fresh Start" (based on "Head Start") to help students with serious behavior problems. (SAM)

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"The Language Crisis in America and the Challenge of Teaching Communication Survival Skills for the 21st Century" is a report I bring you after traveling more than 70,000 miles and working with more than 150,000 students and teachers in schools throughout the United States and abroad. I was invited into the schools to help teachers empower their students in writing after my children's book The First Forest became a best-seller and part of whole language programs in schools across the country.

I speak from the perspective of a journalist who loves writing and a father who loves children. The conclusions I share with you are based on direct experience with students, observation of and conversations with hundreds of teachers and their principals, and 22 years' experience as an employer in business communications. I omit names in this report because I am in the schools to empower the children, not to eavesdrop on teachers and principals.

I also speak from the perspective of a student every teacher knows: I am the student you cannot reach, the student you cannot motivate, the student who will not cooperate, the student who may even make you think about getting out of teaching. On behalf of your students who fit that description, I share with you a message from my book Keeping First Things First which is dedicated, "To my teachers, from an uncooperative student with inexpressible gratitude. . . .I gave them ulcers. They gave me love. They taught me never, never to give up on anyone, including myself. I can never repay them. All I can do is strive to pass along to others the help and encouragement they gave me."

That is my goal in this report. I wish to share with you not only information, but also encouragement by reminding you of and thanking you for the profound and enduring difference you are making in the lives of your students despite the significant and growing challenges you face.

In citing the language crisis in America, I emphasize that the word "crisis" does not necessarily mean bad news. Some tend to think of it that way because they associate the word "crisis" with news reports of crises in cities or countries torn by violence. But the dictionary definition I cite is "a crucial or decisive point or situation, a turning point." I refer to the crucial situation you face in developing the communication skills of your students.

Language Discrimination

Development of communication skills is crucial because your students are entering a world of language discrimination, a world in which language skills open or close doors to opportunity and achievement. Every person naturally discriminates when he or she chooses an airline to fly or a car to buy. That discrimination is based on confidence in perceived competence and quality. Language discrimination is of the same type. Those who develop their language skills are thought of as intelligent, trustworthy, responsible, reliable, and are given opportunities to advance in whatever it is they want to do. Those who fail to develop their language skills face a very different fate: no matter how bright they are, no matter how sharp they are, no matter how popular they are with their school friends, when they enter what some students call the "real world," they face barriers to advancement they themselves create every time they open their mouths or write a note.

No business wants to be represented by persons who have not mastered language skills. Persons who write or speak poorly damage the company's image and call both the company's products and general competence into question.

Yet it is a common business complaint that our schools graduate many students who cannot communicate clearly. Particularly, they cannot write clearly. If they cannot write clearly, it is a sign they cannot think clearly. And if they cannot think clearly, they will be severely restricted in what they will be able to accomplish in their lives because well developed communication skills are the single most easily identifiable characteristic separating those who are successful in whatever they do from those who are less successful.

Technological Displacement

Rapidly developing technology has added another dimension to the language crisis: high school counselors tell me today's students must be prepared to make eight career changes -- not job changes, but career changes -- as technology renders more and more jobs obsolete. At the same time, technology is creating new opportunities for those who are prepared to be lifelong learners. Well developed language skills, the basic and essential tools for learning, will separate the students who will be able to re-educate themselves and move into those new opportunities from those who will be left behind.

My son, Brian, a University of Illinois computer engineering graduate who works with companies updating technology to remain competitive in a world economy, already tells me some workers he sees are not prepared to be retrained. Their basic learning skills, their reading and writing skills, are so poor they first must be trained to be retrainable. Students who enter the 21st century without solid grounding in language

skills are putting themselves at risk of being reduced to living at third world levels in the developing world economy.

Word Poverty

Student vocabulary levels, indicators of present and future achievement, also raise the issue of a language crisis. A University of Indiana study compared the writing of elementary school students in 1945 with the writing of elementary school students in 1988. From writing samples, they were able to extrapolate active vocabulary levels of the children. They found the vocabulary level of elementary school children in 1945 was 25,000 words. The vocabulary level of elementary school children in 1988 was only 10,000 words. In 1988, the elementary school children knew only 40% of the words their parents and grandparents knew.

That is a critical development for our children because words are symbols for ideas; the more words they know, the more ideas they know; and the more ideas they know, the more creative they can be -- because creativity is ultimately a process of putting old ideas together in a new way. Children left to suffer word poverty, idea poverty, are prime candidates for material poverty.

One reason for the precipitous vocabulary decline is the amount of time children spend watching television. The vocabulary in the world of the spoken word is much smaller than the vocabulary used in writing. In 1945, the children were reading in their spare time; in 1988, they were spending their spare time watching television. There are wonderful programs on television, of course, and neither we nor the children are about to turn our sets off entirely. But it is imperative that we encourage the children to shut them off once in a while and spend some of their time reading.

Desensitized Children

Not only does reading have a salutary effect on their vocabularies, idea power, and writing, but it also aids in developing their critical thinking skills and curbing the ugly and crippling desensitization of the children resulting, in part, from excessive TV. Examples of that desensitization abound.

Several months ago, I was working with a group of teachers who reported being horrified when students watching a video of people being severely beaten during the L.A. riots reacted to the violence by cheering. The students did not associate violence with suffering and seemed unable to distinguish fantasy from reality. The teachers said it was as though the students thought they were playing a video game.

Even as I prepared this presentation, I read in USA Today about seven sixth-graders who attempted to kill their teacher in Columbus, Georgia. The article reported that "Experts say murder or violence often isn't real to children nowadays. 'It's so commonplace in their lives, largely from television, it's lost its meaning,' says James Fox, dean of the College of Criminal Justice at Northeastern University."

Quick Fixes

En route to this conference, I opened Hemispheres Magazine and found United Airlines Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Stephen Wolf tuned to the same channel. He wrote, "Television distorts reality and, in the process, obscures fundamental values. Children are often shown that wealth and beauty are the keys to happiness. They do not see people working hard for that wealth because that does not make for an exciting broadcast. And they rarely see programs featuring those whose beauty goes much deeper than the surface. Such programming offers children a world of shallow values,

instant gratification, and quick fixes, with heroes who are always attractive and never work for what they have or want."

At first I thought it was a coincidence to come across those articles which reinforce my point just before my presentation, but then I realized the problem is so widespread those types of articles can be found virtually any day -- and that is what actually and more forcefully makes my point.

Critical Thinking Skills

That some television fosters violent, anti-social behavior is easily documented, but its influence is strongest on those who lack critical thinking skills, who passively accept the values and imitate the actions of those they see. What can parents and teachers do about it? Attempts to isolate and insulate the children from those influences are futile. But one positive step we can take is to inoculate or immunize the children against those influences by developing critical thinking skills through writing. Children who develop their writing power -- through journals, for example -- develop their critical thinking skills at the same time -- and those skills can have a profound effect on behavior.

In my travels to hundreds of schools in every imaginable circumstance across America, I have seen first hand the dramatic impact development of critical thinking skills through writing can have on student behavior. My degree is in Journalism, but I have always been told by teachers that they can recognize students from homes where parents read aloud to the children. And now that I have been in so many schools and have worked with so many children, I can recognize the difference myself. The children from read-aloud homes have a greater attention span; they have larger vocabularies; they love books; they become better readers; they are more creative, and they generally do better

academically. Read-aloud parents have a profound impact on their children.

The Impact of Journals

But now I have begun to notice in my travels that I also can recognize students who are keeping journals. They have something special about them, an alertness in their eyes, an intelligent expression on their faces. I have observed that writing in journals affects students, not only in their writing and academic skills, but also in their very bearing, the way they treat each other and treat other people.

I think I now understand why. I recently discussed my discovery with a principal at a school with a very strong writing program. The principal pointed out that it is possible for us to live our lives without thinking very much. We can watch TV without thinking. We can read some books without thinking. We can even do some math without thinking. But we cannot write without thinking. The principal suggested the difference I am noticing in students who are keeping journals results from their writing. Writing makes them reflective. They become better listeners. They become better observers. They not only take in information, but they think about it, process it, and formulate reactions in their intellects, not just in their emotions. What makes the difference is that they do not simply accept what they are spoon fed, but they analyze and synthesize and formulate their own ideas. I believe that is what makes the difference I have noticed in the children who are developing their writing power with journals. Those same critical thinking powers developed in the writing process can help the children reject and overcome anti-social messages and violence in the media. And children with those powers can be a force for healing and wholeness in their homes and communities.

Critical Coping Skills

Critical coping skills also are developed as language skills are developed. We are fighting an epidemic of children running away from reality, seeking relief in the world of mind-numbing, mind-rotting drugs. Others give up and give in to despair: suicide is cited as the third leading cause of death among our children. The development of writing power and the coping skills that power provides can make a difference here, too.

G.K. Chesterton wrote that it is the mathematician who commits suicide, not the poet. He was writing before we had the "right brain/left brain" terminology some use to describe us: the left brain being defined as mathematical, logical, problem solving, orderly -- the mathematician in us, while the right brain is defined as playful, creative, imaginative, intuitive -- the poet in us. What Chesterton meant is that the left brain person or the mathematician demands a cause-and-effect relationship for everything in life. In fact, we are rational creatures living in a non-rational world: life simply is not always logical and reasonable and predictable. A great deal of what happens to us and those we love is simply beyond our control. We do not even have complete control over the next breath we take. Chesterton said the mathematician cannot accept that, rigidly demands cause-and-effect relationships where they do not exist, and self-destructs when reality refuses to cooperate. It is the poet, he wrote, who has power to bend, power to accept those things over which he or she has no control, power to cope.

In developing language power, we develop both right brain and left brain powers; we become whole-brained. And we need both. Without right brain power, life can seem hopeless. A left brain person is always wringing his or her hands when a new problem comes along, is always saying, "It's the end of

the world. We'll never solve this problem." From a left brain perspective, that may be correct; if we have only left brain powers, we can only reprocess old information in computer-like fashion; we cannot develop new approaches, new ways of looking at things, new insights, new thinking that may be necessary to solve the problems. Some suggest that it is the right brain where hope resides, where vision resides, where we have the power to see possibilities and come up with new ideas. A person who has only left brain powers -- and we live in what tends to be a left brain dominant society -- is like a bird in a cage, unable to fly, unable to utilize the full potential of his or her capabilities.

The Drug Culture

If it is in right brain power -- the poet in us -- where we find hope, then we may be contributing unwittingly to the drug culture and condemning our children to despair if we fail to help them -- or let them -- develop their right brain powers. Right brain powers flourish in freedom, in unstructured time, play time, dream time. But many children have daily schedules and regimented activities more hectic and demanding than some adults' schedules. They are up early in the morning, on the bus, in school all day, then back on the bus or on to additional structured, often pressure-packed programs and activities. When they do get free time, they turn on the TV and their free time is broken into 30 and 60 minute units of essentially passive, left brain activity, watching someone else's creativity but doing very little for their own. They come to the end of the day with little or no opportunity to develop their right brain powers.

It is, I believe, very difficult being a child today, far more difficult than when Tom Heflin, the award-winning artist who created the paintings for The First Forest, and I were children. Tom recalls an experience in his youth that illustrates the

point. He remembers wandering through a field on a warm summer day, semi-bored as he roamed and played near a stream running through the field. Looking back on that and similar experiences, he said it was during such times that he was absorbing, as if by osmosis, colors and textures and shapes that now burst forth in his paintings. I have similar experiences and recollections as a writer. For many children, such opportunities are rare or non-existent; for many children, there's very little time to be a child.

Children need play time, dream time, free time, time to explore and think and create. Children with well developed language skills, who have been helped to discover the fun and power of reading and writing, have powerful ways to play, to dream, to be free, to create, to cope.

The Criminal Dimension

Crime statistics provide another dimension for the language crisis as we consider what so often happens to those who fail to develop reading and writing powers: 60% of the people who end up in jail cannot read and write; 59% still cannot read and write when they get out. In some countries, if you get into jail, you can never get out until you can prove you know how to read and write. One reason for that, of course, is people who have the power to read and the power to write and the thinking power that goes with reading and writing do not do some of the stupid things people do to get themselves into jail in the first place.

Civil Disorder

Not only crime, but civil disorder and rioting can be a result of inadequate language skills. When the need to understand and be understood is frustrated, the frustration creates a pressure that grows and grows until it explodes, often in

violence. Reading and writing give us the capacity to understand our own and others' thoughts, the ability to identify and act within proper channels, and the power to express our thoughts forcefully. Well developed language skills provide constructive outlets for otherwise destructive forces.

Economic Impact

In addition to helping create safe streets and peaceful cities, language skills play a vital role in our nation's economic competitiveness. Yet, "More than ten million workers in small businesses have trouble doing their jobs because their reading, writing, and math skills are so poor," an Associated Press article reports. "Some examples of the problems that result: workers improperly read instructions on an assembly line; they give customers the wrong change; verbal instructions are misinterpreted. The Washington-based Southport Institute for Policy Analysis called the problem a serious one that 'demands national attention.' 'Problems with basic skills are a serious barrier to improving productivity of these firms and the nation's economic competitiveness,' institute President Forest E. Chisman said. A study by the institute concluded that 40% of the nation's small business workers have trouble with basic skills."

The Price We Pay

So the language crisis in America affects all of us, not just students and teachers. All of us pay a price when language skills are not adequately developed: we pay a price in terms of failure in economic development; we pay a price in violence and high crime rates; we pay a price in failure to develop our most vital natural resource -- our people. We pay a price now and perhaps an even higher price in the future -- because the children are the only real social security we have. When

economists express fears about the Social Security System going bankrupt, they are talking only about money, a medium of exchange that fluctuates in value and a system that is only as sound as the society behind it. That is why the only real social security we have is in able, educated, creative, competent, caring children who will be running the world tomorrow -- and language skills are the tools for building those qualities.

The Challenge

As the language crisis in America affects everyone, so does meeting the challenge of teaching communication survival skills for the 21st century. I have found in my travels that much of the challenge lies outside the classroom, in the attitudes and values of parents and politicians.

Problems With Parents

Indifferent parents create a special challenge for principals and teachers. On the west coast, I worked with a principal who reported little community interest in education because few parents there had graduated from high school, let alone college. The principal said the prevailing attitude was, "I got by with a fifth grade education, and if it was good enough for me, it's good enough for my kid." What prospects do those children and that community have in the 21st century?

On the other end of the spectrum, some concerned parents create classroom havoc by leveling indiscreet criticism at the school system and teachers. One parents' group in the Midwest called a meeting specifically to instruct members to tone down the rhetoric in their disagreement with the school district. It seems the children were picking up their parents' belligerent and disrespectful attitude and were directing it at teachers in classrooms and hallways.

Neglected Children

Another home grown challenge teachers face is dealing with students suffering from parental neglect. That neglect is not restricted to one social stratum. I was in a very wealthy area of upstate New York presenting programs at a private school with a student/teacher ratio of eight to one. When a teacher there learned I was going to a school in the Bronx the next day, she told me she had taught there the year before and I was in for some pretty heavy culture shock. But she noted her students at both schools had one thing in common: though they came from very different backgrounds and there were many obvious differences in the schools, students at both schools suffered from neglect: the Bronx school children were suffering from neglect -- due to poverty; the private school children were suffering from neglect -- due to wealth. The causes were opposite, the results the same: in both cases, the parents were not home to care for the children.

Problems With Politicians

Politicians are especially guilty of placing burdens on principals and teachers with their continual focus on test results. In my travels, I have found reports of test results can present a very distorted picture of what is going on in the classrooms. We need standards, of course, but I believe some politicians who dwell on test scores are more concerned about their own political careers and less concerned about the needs and welfare of the children. Everywhere I go, north and south, east and west, I find tremendous love. I find teachers sacrificing for their students, including making purchases for them out of their own pockets. I have found the teachers I work with providing exactly what their children need, though it may not show up in test scores.

One example is a school outside of Chicago. I arrived early and watched as the buses pulled up. The students were obviously happy to be there. They came bounding off the buses and ran up to teachers who greeted them with hugs in front of the school. I went inside and presented three programs. In the course of the day, I learned that most of the students were from a very distressed area and unstable homes. Forty of the children were coming from abuse situations and foster homes. After my programs, the teachers wanted me to visit classrooms. In one large room, called the pod, the first, second and third grades each occupied one corner of the room. The students came into that classroom in the first grade; they were there again in the 2nd grade; they were there again in the 3rd grade. Their teachers had worked together for 17 years. In that room, the children were experiencing some stability in their lives, probably the only stability and continuity they knew. They were experiencing what some people call "family." And I saw in the spirit and enthusiasm of those students that the teachers were giving them exactly what they needed in terms of self-esteem, in terms of the simple desire to stay alive. Will that show up in the test scores today? Probably not. Will that show up in the test scores later? I believe it will. But those teachers are making a real, lasting, significant contribution to the lives of their students and they deserve applause and recognition. And it is such teachers who are empowering their students to make a real, lasting, significant contribution to their communities. And that is the only test that really matters.

The danger of establishing test scores as the criterion upon which schools and teachers are judged is that the tests ignore classroom dynamics and the immediate, pressing needs of the children. They compel principals and teachers to focus on test requirements and "teach to the test." Test score obsession is a left brain idea from a left brain political establishment with questionable motivation.

Creating Chaos

Test score focus certainly will not help teachers at a Bronx school I visited. I noted the large class sizes as I watched students filing into the gym for one of my programs. As I waited and the students kept pouring in, I mentioned to one of the teachers that we should be paying particular attention to those children because they are most at risk and need the most help. One basic step in that direction would be to reduce the number of students per teacher. He told me the opposite was being done, that the district was about to lay off 400 teachers which would bring his class size to more than 40 students. It is a challenge to keep order let alone teach anything under those circumstances.

Incorrigible Troublemakers

Keeping order regardless of class size has become a major challenge in some districts I have visited. The problem is growing worse and threatens to destroy any hope for helping even the children who want to learn. Locked classrooms and bathrooms, metal detectors, bars on windows, students and teachers living in fear, empty crack vials on sidewalks outside schools, shootings, murders -- it has become so bad one California school offered parents bargain rate burial insurance for their children! Too many excellent teachers I know are ready to call it quits. The Mayor of Milwaukee, preceding me on a television talk-show, described the situation as hopeless and called for closing the schools. That extreme response is more an expression of frustration than of realistic policy, but the mayor is not alone in describing the situation as hopeless. It is hopeless unless we devise an effective, constructive way to get chronic troublemakers, those who are inveterate and seemingly incorrigible troublemakers, out of the schools and

create once again a safe learning environment for students and teachers.

Operation "Fresh Start"

The opportunity for such action, I believe, has presented itself. Our government is now planning to close military bases and sell those properties to land developers. It may be more in the national interest to turn those properties over to people developers. We have had demonstrable success in raising children's prospects for productive, fulfilling lives with the program called "Head Start." Now there is an urgent need for a program we might call "Fresh Start" -- not a program of reprisal or vengeance, but a program of correction and discipline and empowerment to provide prospects for productive, fulfilling lives to children rushing headlong to destruction and taking many innocent people with them.

It is not cruel to remove chronic troublemakers from the schools. It is cruel to leave them there to plague and destroy themselves and others; it is cruel to leave them without help or hope; it is cruel to fail to react with "tough love" today so they can have lives worth living tomorrow.

Rehabilitating Students

"Fresh Start" would provide rehabilitation, not incarceration. It would provide training in basic living skills to enable the children to assume a role in civilized society. It would utilize military personnel to instill discipline in a boot camp-like atmosphere and cadres of select, highly paid teachers to instruct and inspire and motivate. Children would be sent to "Fresh Start" by the schools, by the courts, and by parents who have been unable to help their children and who want to give their children a fresh start in a new environment free of drugs and gangs and violence. The children would be enrolled in

"Fresh Start," not sentenced, and graduated, not released. Graduation would follow demonstrated growth in living skills, academic skills, and would require a commitment to return home as a helper-counselor for other children at risk.

Costs for "Fresh Start" would be offset by reduced security costs at schools and reduced community costs for police, prosecution, and prisons. Funding and management of "Fresh Start" would require public and private sector participation, with initial funding done by reallocation of resources now spent on treating symptoms without getting at the cause. Immediate benefits would include freeing teachers to teach, students to learn, and all citizens to enjoy safer, saner communities. Long term benefits would include not only development of priceless human potential, but financial benefits as well: children empowered to live productive, fulfilling lives become tax-payers instead of tax-takers. It is the cost of not acting that is prohibitive.

Community Of Learners

But freeing teachers and principals to truly maximize development of student potential is only partially accomplished by removal and rehabilitation of chronic troublemakers. A growing number of districts I have visited are examining and changing gifted or tracking programs which they find handicapping some students and malforming others. In short, they are finding students live up to or down to the implied expectations of their placements, as though living out self-fulfilling prophecies based on the messages they receive: students placed in a slow track receive a message that they are inferior to others and will never be achievers; students placed in a fast track receive a message that they are superior and privileged. The new approach is similar to one element of the Japanese system which focuses on building a community of learners: greater ability is concomitant with greater

responsibility to the community and those with more ability are expected to help those who have less. The net result has been students who are more cooperative and less competitive, classrooms in which everyone is important and the talents of all are developed, and students who have a sense of responsibility to the community which makes their education possible in the first place.

When adults lack that same sense of community responsibility, they pose another challenge for educators, a funding challenge. One example of the mentality that shirks community responsibility is a real-estate agent who boasted in a newspaper interview about offering houses located outside community taxing districts but close enough to take advantage of community services. I found another example in textbooks on entrepreneurship in the business college section of a major university center's bookstore. References to community responsibility were limited to those which could be exploited for profit. They advocated building a business to sell, not to endure. Because education is a long term process requiring long term community commitments, it suffers when the prevailing mindset is take-your-money-and-run.

Public Support

Applying the maxim "keep every dollar next to the students" is how one district I visited meets the need to gain and maintain public support and confidence. The board questions every expenditure for student education value and does its own research in addition to accepting administration recommendations. When the superintendent asked for a public relations assistant, the board threw out the request and then threw out the superintendent; on the other hand, when board members found principals overburdened with administrative duties at the expense of curriculum and staff development, they chose to put an assistant principal in charge of those areas

in each school. Wringing maximum education value out of every dollar by focusing first on the immediate needs of students, teachers, and principals has generated community pride in schools that enrich and students who excel.

The Principals

Principals play a key role in such schools. I can now walk into a school building and, without meeting the principal, discern his or her leadership style by meeting a few teachers and students. If the principal is a listener and consensus builder, a person who truly respects the teachers, I see a special spirit -- enthusiasm -- in the faculty and in the students. An east coast school I visited for assembly programs two years ago had such a principal and was alive with enthusiasm. When I returned for classroom writing workshops the next year, I immediately knew something was wrong. There was funereal gloom where there had been joy. I learned the principal had been transferred and replaced by a new principal whose attitude was, "I know what I want and I don't need anyone helping me decide what we're going to do here." His autocratic approach had killed their spirit and the teachers were in mourning.

The Teachers

What stands out even more as I recall that experience and what I often see in other schools where teachers are coping with similar discouraging and oppressive circumstances, are the teachers' resilience, creativity, adaptability, and resourcefulness. Those qualities are flexible and focused on the present, on what is needed now. Autocratic and dictatorial approaches are rigid and focused on the past, on what may have worked at one time. Rigid approaches are vain attempts to reduce education to a formula or system which can be mass produced and consistently effective.

Consistently Effective Trait

Though I have seen no such formula or system, I have found one trait that is consistently effective. It is a quality or gift I have seen in countless teachers who combine subject matter competence with truly, sincerely, selflessly caring about each child. It is a quality of character, beautiful and powerful in its effect. It is the effective teacher's motivation and is ultimately the power that sustains him or her through the challenges mentioned above and the many I have not had time to cite.

Those teachers' qualities and powers -- resilience, creativity, adaptability, resourcefulness, selflessness, and sincerely caring about each child -- are particularly helpful for developing writing skills.

Growth Principle

I see those qualities at work in teachers who live the growth principle they teach: the more you write, the better writer you become. Sharing from their own journals and writing, they build writing confidence by helping students understand writing is a lifelong, learn-by-doing process.

I see those qualities at work in teachers who help their students find <u>their</u> writing interests rather than merely assigning writing tasks. They know the key is listening to the students, helping them focus on and write about their interests so the motivation to write comes from within.

Real Communication

I see those qualities at work in teachers who convert writing from an academic exercise into real communication. They know that writing exercises are boring, but real communication is exciting. They start class or school

newspapers, turn a tape recorder or the school P.A. system into a "radio station," or start a "television station" with a video tape camera. Their students write stories and reports and ads and letters to publish or broadcast to their peers and others. Because their writing has meaning and purpose, the students focus on the messages they are communicating and learn the joy of writing as a by-product.

I see those qualities at work in teachers who encourage creativity and vocabulary development by relaxing the rules and freeing children in early grades to express themselves with creative or innovative or inventive or developmental spelling. They know we learn to write the same way we learn to walk and talk -- with encouragement for our first feeble, faltering efforts, not with constant criticism and correction. Without crushing budding creativity, they later help students understand spelling and grammatical norms needed to communicate ideas more effectively.

Bringing Out The Best

I see those qualities at work in teachers who adapt their efforts to the varying needs of various students. They know what works with one may not work with another: some students can work in groups, but others need to work alone; some can start with outlining and organizing, but others need to let their ideas flow and structure them later. They know how to bring out the best in each student and help each student accept responsibility for his or her own growth.

Bringing out the best in each student and fostering individual responsibility describe what I have observed teachers and principals doing in response to the language crisis in America, a crisis which exists, my travels and experiences compel me to conclude, in spite of, not because of our schools.

The Students

Focus on overall test score declines by the media and political community put misdirected pressure on already strained schools while failing to address questions of basic student teachability. In many cases, expecting students to learn and perform as past students have is like expecting them to carry water in a sieve. We know students need proper physical nutrition to learn and have made a national effort to correct that deficiency where it exists. We also know they need emotional support and moral training -- by word and example -- but popular culture undermines rather than fosters efforts to correct that deficiency.

As long as that is the case, teachers' and principals' burdens are doubled and rewards are halved. Despite their success with most students, many teachers I see are discouraged to the point of doubting their own ability and self-worth by the unresponsiveness of children culturally conditioned to fail. What really is happening is illustrated in the old analogy of the sun shining on ice cubes and mud: the ice cubes, hard objects, become soft and fluid; the mud, soft and fluid, becomes hard. The same sun shines on both, yet the results are opposite; the difference is in the objects. So it is, I find, in the schools: the difference is in the students.

Reaching The Difficult

Because I was a difficult, uncooperative, unmotivated student, many teachers at reading councils and in-service programs ask how my teachers finally reached me. I must report their greatest impact was made not by their words or subject matter, but by their very persons. They made love incarnate for me.

And you are doing the same for your students by being who you are and what you are, by being there and consistently

caring for them -- even in the face of rejection. You may not see the results or know your impact, and you may never hear the words "thank you" from your students directly. That is why I said at the beginning my goal in this report is not only to share information, but also to encourage and thank you for the profound and enduring difference you are making in the lives of your students despite the significant and growing challenges you face. I have seen it with my own eyes. I have experienced it in my own life. And I thank you.

Author Background

John Gile is a journalist and best-selling author with more than 25 years' experience in writing for newspapers, magazines, radio, and television.

He established John Gile Communications, business communications, marketing, and publishing in 1971 and has served as editor and publisher of regional periodicals and of books by area authors. He is author of features published by periodicals throughout the United States and Canada; created and produced the cartoon "Blockheads" for the Register and Tribune Syndicate, and wrote the humor column "Gile Without Guile" which was syndicated nationally by NC News Service. He has presented programs across the nation to hundreds of thousands, including student reading and writing programs, teacher in-service writing programs, communication workshops for businesses and organizations, and has been a guest on numerous radio and television talk shows across the country.

He was reporter for the Rockford Register Republic, a daily newspaper, managing editor of The Observer, an 11-county weekly diocesan newspaper, and served as president of The Writer's Workshop. While attending college, he worked as continuity writer for Rockford's CBS affiliate, as a reporter for McGraw-Hill's Dodge Construction News Service, and was college newspaper editor and columnist. Before that he served as a Russian interpreter for the United States Army Security Agency.

Books

The First Forest has become one of the most popular children's books in North America and a perennial best-seller. It is being used by teachers in Language Arts, Graphic Arts, Whole Language Science Teaching, Peace and Environmental Issue Discussions, Narrative/Musical Presentations, and as a prime example of Pourquoi Literature. It has been cited by the Graduate Department of Library Sciences at Villanova University, the Book Award Committee of the Association for Indiana Media Educators, Scholastic of Canada, and Center for Applied Linguistics, Department of Education, Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs. The First Forest has been a number one best-seller for the Kroch's & Brentano's Chain of Bookstores, a number one regional best-seller for Waldenbooks, and a Chicago Tribune best-seller for four consecutive holiday seasons. Another Gile book, Keeping First Things First, also has been on the Chicago Tribune Best-Seller List for six weeks, has been a Kroch's & Brentano's best-seller, and is now in its third printing. His school program "How A Book Is Born," has become one of the most sought after programs of its type in the country and has now been produced on video tape. Works in progress include: Writing Opportunities For Children, Footsteps In The Forest, Oh, How I Wished I Could Read!, You're Not The Person I Married, and video tape production of writing workshops.

Education

- Bachelor of Science Degree, Magna Cum Laude, Journalism, Northern Illinois University.
  Elected to Kappa Tau Alpha, National Honor Society for Journalism Students.
- Associate in Arts Degree, Magna Cum Laude, Rock Valley College, Rockford, Illinois.
  Elected to Phi Theta Kappa, National Honor Society for Junior College Students.
- Russian Interpreter Graduate, Defense Language Institute, Monterey, California.

Personal

- Born August 21, 1944, Cuba City, Wisconsin.
- Married April 15, 1967. Two children graduated from the University of Illinois, one majoring in Nursing at the University of Iowa, one in high school, and two in grade school.
- Served Five Years On Board of Directors, University of Illinois Dads' Association.
- Member of St. Peter Cathedral Parish with service as Parish Council President and in numerous other offices.
- Served as Chief Spokesperson for Home Rule Advisory Committee and as Chairman of Rockford Taxpayers' Advisory Committee.
- Lived in Turkey for one year and in California for two years.
- Travels include visits to Greece, Germany, France, Austria, Belgium, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland, Mexico, Canada, and to areas throughout the continental United States, with more than 70,000 miles on speaking tours in the last 30 months.

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